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NATURAL DISASTER REDUCTION: INTERRELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN TECHNOLOGICAL AND NATURAL HAZARDS

Technical session

Na-Techs: A review of the experience of the United Nations Environment Programme

Summary of presentation by Mr. Alain Clerc, Coordinator, Centre for Urgent Environmental Assistance, United Nations Environment Programme

1. Until recently, the sole focus of disaster management was on humanitarian concerns. We are now seeing the environmental implications of both natural and technological hazards being addressed at the international level. Research has shown that:

(a) The environmental implications of all forms of disasters can be severe, with both acute and chronic impacts on populations and habitat;

(b) Natural disasters, such as floods and earthquakes, can provide the trigger for technological accidents such as pipeline ruptures and destruction of chemical plants;

(c) Technological influences, such as chemical releases and pollution, can have dramatic effects on natural hazards (e.g., global warming and climate change as a result of industrial activity). Even events perceived as being natural, such as floods, are often the direct result of such man-made activity as deforestation, resulting in increased soil erosion and water run-off.

2. Communities at both local and international levels must recognize such synergy and identify the linkages between natural and technological hazards in order to integrate planning, preparation and response on a multi-hazard basis.

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It is also important that environmental implications be taken more seriously: pollution kills people as well as habitat; it destroys livelihoods and affects communities over a long time period, sometimes for generations. Environmental concerns are human concerns. By taking care of the environmental aspects of a disaster, the humanitarian implications are automatically taken on board. The reverse is not necessarily the case.

3. The international community has an important role to play in supporting developing countries in achieving national capacity to prevent, prepare for, respond to and recover from such disasters. The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) has taken a lead in the United Nations system in addressing the environmental implications of disasters and is working in close collaboration with other United Nations agencies so as to ensure a cohesive and comprehensive approach to disaster mitigation.

4. The key concepts of UNEP involvement include capacity building (at all levels, including backstopping at the international level), awareness raising, and catalysing action. The ultimate aim is for countries to be able to cope with natural and technological disasters without the need for international assistance. That aim is a long way off (e.g., a recent UNEP study found many developing countries have absolutely no capacity to respond to chemical spills, so incidents regarded as minor in the United States of America or Japan could easily become disasters in a developing country. Until countries are in a position whereby their ability to prevent, prepare for and respond to technological accidents can be equated with their increasing industrialization and urbanization, there will always be a role for international support. There are three main UNEP initiatives that attempt to increase capacity, improve awareness and catalyse local and national action for both technological and natural hazards:

(a) APELL, the Awareness and Preparedness at the Local Level programme aims to train communities in planning and preparedness for industrial risk management. The APELL programme is the bedrock of UNEP's capacity-building programme for industrial accidents;

(b) Despite all efforts to prevent accidents, some will inevitably occur; for this reason, the UNEP Centre for Urgent Environmental Assistance was established on an experimental basis to examine the potential of providing a practical "safety net" for countries facing an environmental emergency, of whatever origin. This small unit works in very close collaboration with the existing DHA 24-hour emergency telephone system of the Department for Humanitarian Affairs and acts as a conduit between countries that need assistance and countries that are prepared to assist, either in the provision of information, incident assessment or post-accident follow-up;

(c) At a strategic level, and embracing the concept of multi-hazard recognition at the highest level, a more recent initiative has been the establishment of a joint UNEP/Habitat Task Force examining the continuum from relief to development. This initiative is aimed at integrating and rationalizing the strengths of two agencies in order to provide a better service to countries that need assistance in any stage of the disaster cycle, irrespective of whether the disaster is natural or man-made.